

# Middlesex University Research Repository

An open access repository of

Middlesex University research

<http://eprints.mdx.ac.uk>

Pizzolato, Nicola ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3618-5188> (2017) The IWW in Turin: 'Militant history', workers' struggle and the crisis of Fordism in 1970s Italy. *International Labor and Working Class History*, 91 . pp. 109-126. ISSN 0147-5479 [Article] (doi:10.1017/S0147547916000314)

Final accepted version (with author's formatting)

This version is available at: <https://eprints.mdx.ac.uk/21314/>

## Copyright:

Middlesex University Research Repository makes the University's research available electronically.

Copyright and moral rights to this work are retained by the author and/or other copyright owners unless otherwise stated. The work is supplied on the understanding that any use for commercial gain is strictly forbidden. A copy may be downloaded for personal, non-commercial, research or study without prior permission and without charge.

Works, including theses and research projects, may not be reproduced in any format or medium, or extensive quotations taken from them, or their content changed in any way, without first obtaining permission in writing from the copyright holder(s). They may not be sold or exploited commercially in any format or medium without the prior written permission of the copyright holder(s).

Full bibliographic details must be given when referring to, or quoting from full items including the author's name, the title of the work, publication details where relevant (place, publisher, date), pagination, and for theses or dissertations the awarding institution, the degree type awarded, and the date of the award.

If you believe that any material held in the repository infringes copyright law, please contact the Repository Team at Middlesex University via the following email address:

[eprints@mdx.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@mdx.ac.uk)

The item will be removed from the repository while any claim is being investigated.

See also repository copyright: re-use policy: <http://eprints.mdx.ac.uk/policies.html#copy>

# The IWW in Turin: ‘Militant history’, workers’ struggle and the crisis of Fordism in 1970s Italy

Nicola Pizzolato

In 1970s Italy, the historical trajectory, tactics and goals of the International Workers of the World (IWW)—the American radical labour union active between 1905 and 1924—rose to renown, and references to the Wobblies appeared frequently in essays, journal articles, books and in contemporary debates of Italy’s own radical movement. The 1970s were, according to labour activist and historian Peppino Ortoleva, ‘probably the most famous episode of the American labour movement in Italy’.<sup>1</sup>

Why was the history of the IWW so appealing to the Italian radical movement of the 1970s? In what political and social context were the Italians interrogating that history? What were its lessons for Italian working class activism? And what were the transnational connections that made it possible for the Italians to ‘love’ the Wobblies? Here I try to answer these questions with specific reference to the historical context of the workers’ struggle at FIAT in Turin, both because of its importance in the history of the Italian labour and radical movement and because most of the actors behind the Italian reading of the IWW had cut their teeth in the workers’ strikes of Turin of the late 1960s and followed closely the company restructurings of the 1970s.

The aim of this article is to challenge methodological nationalism in the study of workers’ insurgencies by proposing a way to chart the influence of US history far beyond its borders and across time. Historiography on the IWW includes both national and transnational studies. Scholars have taken up the issue in the context of an international labour movement, connecting stories between places as distant as the US, South Africa and New Zealand, and they have also emphasised the First World War as a global event that had a powerful impact on the history of the IWW, in the context of which the US government began to suppress it.<sup>2</sup> Marcel van der Linden has suggested

---

<sup>1</sup> ‘Si tratta probabilmente del problema più noto in Italia di tutta la storia del movimento operaio americano’, Peppino Ortoleva, ‘Classe operaia e potere politico in USA (1860-1920) in *Primo Maggio*, n. 3-4, Febbraio-Settembre, 1974.

<sup>2</sup> Francis Shor, ‘Gender and Labour/Working Class History in Comparative Perspective: The Syndicalist and Wobbly Experience in the USA, Australia, and New Zealand’, *Left History* 11.2 (2006), pp. 118-136; Francis Shor, ‘Left Labor Agitators in the Pacific Rim of the Early Twentieth Century’ in *International Labor and Working-Class History* 67 (2005), pp. 148-163; Lany Peterson, ‘The One Big Union in International Perspective: Revolutionary Industrial Unionism, 1900-1925’ in *Work, Community, and Power: The Experience of Labor in*

that a way to transnationalize American labour history would be to look at how its organisations have served as models for other countries.<sup>3</sup> I would like to further broaden the framework of transnational labour history by looking at the influence of the IWW in another social and political context, focusing on the use of the past by political activists far removed in time and space from that episode of American history. The importance of this analysis lies in the way it illuminates the particular context in which these activists operated. It tells us more about Italian history than it does about American history, but it is testimony to the ‘far reaching’ influence of American history and to entanglements that crossed borders through the work of activists, scholars, and translators.<sup>4</sup> Thus, this project is an attempt to internationalise both American and Italian history through what I would call a *diachronic* transnational approach.

At the same time, together with this diachronic influence there are also synchronic links. For instance, the enthusiasm of Italian activists and left-wing historians regarding the IWW matched the American New Left’s renewed interest in the late 1960s after they had fallen out of favour for decades. The work of Melvin Dubofsky and James Weinstein, as well as coverage on *Radical America*, the magazine of the SDS, and an earlier study by Philip Foner were the main sources upon which the Italians drew for their interpretation of the IWW.<sup>5</sup> Thus, in itself the strange career of the

---

*Europe and America, 1920-1925*, eds., James E. Cronin and Carmen Siriani (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983), pp. 49-87; Verity Burgmann, *Revolutionary Industrial Unionism: The Industrial Workers of the World in Australia* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Peter Cole and Lucien van der Walt ‘Crossing the Color Lines, Crossing the Continents: Comparing the Racial Politics of the IWW in South Africa and the United States, 1905–1925’ in *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies* Vol. 12, No. 1, January 2011, 69–96; Eric Thomas Chester, *The Wobblies in Their Heyday* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Marcel van der Linden, ‘Transnationalising American Labor History’, *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 86, n. 3, pp. 1078-1092. In the same issue, see also David Thelen, ‘The Nation and Beyond: Transnational Perspectives on United States History’, pp. 965-975. See also Ian Tyrrell, ‘Reflections on the Transnational Turn in United States History: Theory and Practice’, *Journal of Global History*, 3 (November 2009), pp. 453-74; ‘AHR Conversation: On Transnational History’, with C. A. Bayly, Sven Beckert, Matthew Connelly, Isabel Hofmeyr, Wendy Kozol, and Patricia Seed, *American Historical Review*, 111 (December 2006), pp. 1440-64; Ian Tyrrell, *Transnational Nation: United States History in Global Perspective Since 1789*, (Basingstoke, Eng.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Ian Tyrrell, *Transnational Nation*, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Melvin Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1969); James Weinstein, *The Decline of Socialism in America, 1912-1925* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967) and by the same author, ‘The IWW and American Socialism’ in *Socialist Revolution*, n. 5 (1970); Joseph Conlin, *Bread and Roses Too: Studies of the Wobblies* (Connecticut: Greenwood, 1969) and by the same author *Big Bill Haywood and the Radical Union Movement* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1969); Robert L. Tyler, *Rebels in the Woods: The IWW in the Pacific Northwest* (Eugene: University of Oregon Books, 1967); Fred Thompson, ‘They Didn’t Suppress the Wobblies’, *Radical America* (Sept-Oct, 1967); Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States, Vol. 4* (New York: International Publishers, 1965). See also J.L. Kornbluh *Rebel Voices: An IWW anthology*, (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan press, 1964) and the memoir published in that time: Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *The Rebel Girl: An Autobiography* (New York: International

IWW in Italy is evidence of the larger phenomenon of transnational streams of intellectual and political exchange in the late sixties and seventies between US and Italy, an issue to which I will return later. It was ironic that a generation of political militants who contested America's racist and unequal society and its foreign policy would choose its history as a source of inspiration and intellectual work as well as embrace its cultural icons and symbols.<sup>6</sup> Umberto has described this as the 'Americanism of an anti-American generation'.<sup>7</sup> In fact, for Italian radicals the study of the IWW went beyond a mere historiographical interest; it was a compelling topic because it provided a lens through which to examine, and intervene in debates about, internal developments of class struggle and the restructuring of capitalism during a period of extensive economic and political transformation in Italy.

### Italy in Turmoil

The juxtaposition between radicals' interest in the IWW and the working class upheaval in Italian factories (in particular those of the industrial northwest) emerged at a crucial juncture of the history of Italian capitalism—a moment of transition between the pinnacle of Fordism and what is often referred to as post-Fordism. The period lasting from 1969 to 1973 had brought about a remarkable level of industrial conflict, often in a self-organised form by workers with the assistance of students. Conflict spread from the core of Italian industrial capitalism—FIAT in Turin and Pirelli in Milan—to the majority of industrial workplaces and the public sector. This period started with the explosive mobilization of the *autunno caldo*, the 'hot autumn' of 1969 in Turin, but the insurgency had not stopped even after the passing of the *Statuto dei lavoratori* (the Workers' Charter, 1971), a major labour reform which brought Italian industrial relations into line with those of other major capitalist nations and actually with terms comparatively more favourable to workers.<sup>8</sup> In some respects, it could be said that the effect of the *Statuto dei lavoratori* was comparable to the Wagner Act (1935) in the US in that it represented a major victory for the labour movement but it was eventually instrumental in stifling strident militancy on the shop floor. Ironically, in the US that model of industrial relations would enter a period of crisis precisely in the 1970s, undermined as it were by an

---

Publishers, 1973). The Italians were also reading, in translation, Patrick Renshaw, *The Wobblies: The Story of the IWW and Syndicalism in the United States* (New York: Doubleday, 1967).

<sup>6</sup> Introduction to *Beyond the Nation: Pushing the Boundaries of US History from a Transatlantic perspective*, F. Fasce, M. Vaudagna, and R. Baritono, eds., (Torino: Otto, 2003), p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.* On the political use of American history in Italy, see Maurizio Vaudagna, 'American History at Home and Abroad', in *Journal of American History*, vol. 81, n. 3, December 1994, pp. 1157-1168 and by the same author, 'American Studies in Italy: Historical Legacies, Public Contexts and Scholarly Trends', in *History of Historiography*, 51, June 2007, pp. 17-63.

<sup>8</sup> 'Italy: The Dual Character of Industrial Relations', in A. Ferner and R. Hyman (eds.), *Changing Industrial Relations in Europe*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998) (with M. Regini).

economic recession, industrial restructuring, and relocation, as well as dwindling support from the rank and file.<sup>9</sup>

In 1971 and 1972, radical groups such as Lotta Continua and Potere Operaio, which had facilitated the alliance between the student movement of 1968 and the autonomous workers' movement of 1969, still had many followers in the factories, in particular the large ones, but they were no longer able to command the bargaining agenda as they had earlier. Trade unions, now protected under the terms of the *Statuto*, had a structure that enabled workers to voice their claims through an institutional channel (which had not been readily available in most of the 1950s and 1960s). In the process of reaching out to radicalised workers, unions had themselves become more democratic. The *delegati*, or shop stewards, were so effective in representing workers that even Lotta Continua, which was opposed to any form of permanent institutionalised representation ('We are all delegates!'), agreed that its members could be candidates. Shop floor bargaining became the norm in the automobile factories of Turin to such an extent that foremen even micro-bargained the speed of the line with the shop delegate at the start of every shift. This amounted to management negotiating production targets with unions, an astounding accomplishment.<sup>10</sup>

In 1973, after a period of two years in which radicals had been very vocal but enjoyed diminishing support, workers were again on the barricades at Mirafiori, FIAT's flagship plant in Turin, where they had achieved their greatest success. From November 1972 to March 1973, FIAT autoworkers fought for the most progressive contract up to that point, the last significant gain before an era of company restructuring and relocations outside Turin and Italy which would permanently alter the balance of power. The occupation of Mirafiori, which was orchestrated by radicals, was an event of national import for its political and symbolic consequences, and it was also the peak of the autonomous and radical workers' movement; from that point on, it would begin to slip into demise. The economic recession set off by the oil crisis bolstered the firm's policy of relocation and state-assisted redundancies (*cassa integrazione*), which appeared to be the best solution to respond to the shop floor upheaval of the previous years. In the early 1970s, the *cassa integrazione* became a tool that large manufacturers such as Indesit (Turin and Caserta), Lanerossi (Schio and Foggia), Philco (Bergamo), Borletti and Pirelli (Milan), and many other large manufacturers used to eradicate industrial conflict in factories, while at the same time they indirectly funded company

---

<sup>9</sup> Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> Giovanni Contini, 'The Rise and Fall of Shop Floor Bargaining at FIAT, 1945-1980' in Steven Tolliday and Jonathan Zeitlin (eds.), *The Automobile Industry and its Workers* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986). See also Giovanni Contini, 'Politics, Law and Shop Floor Bargaining in Postwar Italy' in Steven Tolliday and Jonathan Zeitlin, eds., *The Automobile Industry and its Workers* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986).

restructuring.<sup>11</sup> This also allowed trade unions and, at electoral level, the PCI (the Italian Communist Party), both of which were seen by radicals as reformist forces instrumental to capitalism, to regain consensus and control in the large factories of the northwest of the country, further undermining groups such as Potere Operaio and Lotta Continua. The PCI would go on to receive over one third of the votes in the general elections of 1976. In the same year, Lotta Continua was dissolved, as was Potere Operaio in 1973. Radical politics continued to survive within smaller groups, but none were able to command the influence of those more popular organisations. In the second half of the 1970s, Autonomia Operaia built on the legacy of *operaismo* and functioned as a loose coalition of students, intellectuals, and workers. In Milan and Porto, Marghera autonomisti formed factory committees (for instance at Alfa Romeo and Sit Siemens). As an arena of dissent critical of the Communist party, Autonomia established a visible presence in Rome, Padua, and Bologna, which were not core industrial cities. The latter city became the centre of the movement after the murder of Francesco Lorusso, a former militant from Lotta Continua, in 1977.

Although often differing in their tactical analyses, many of the radicals who drove the protests still subscribed to the (evolving) ideas developed in the 1960s by the *operaisti*, who were Marxists in disagreement with the official line of the Communist or Socialist party, such as Raniero Panzieri, Mario Tronti, Romano Alquati, and Toni Negri, among others. Operaisti emphasized: the autonomous agency of the working class, outside of unions and political parties in the form of grassroots activity and self-organisation on the shop floor; the idea that capitalism was reactive to the workers' struggle (rather than its opposite); an intellectual stance that united theory and practice; the recognition that technology was not a neutral tool, but one used to undermine workers' control; the belief in the existence of a capitalist 'plan' in synergy with the economic policy of the state; the idea of 'class composition', that is, the diverse composition of the working class of technical skills and cultural and political identity; and the endorsement of sabotage and the refusal to work as legitimate forms of political action.<sup>12</sup>

Many of these ideas had blossomed in the 1950s and early 1960s in a transnational dialogue with American and French dissident Marxists, most prominently C.L.R James, Raya Dunayvskaya, Grace Lee Boggs and Martin Glaberman of the Trotskyist splinter group originally called Johnson-Forest Tendency, as well as the French Cornelius Castoriadis, Claude Lefort and Daniel Mothè of *Socialisme*

---

<sup>11</sup> Biagio Longo, 'Meno salario, più reddito: la cassa integrazione', *Primo Maggio*, n. 5 (1975), pp. 18-33.

<sup>12</sup> These arguments are expounded in a series of key texts, such as Mario Tronti, *Operai e capital* (Torino: Einaudi, 1966); and the edited collection Raniero Panzieri, *Spontaneità e organizzazione : gli anni del 'Quaderni rossi', 1959-1964* (Pisa: BFS, 1994); see also Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven: Class composition and struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 2002) e Giuseppe Trotta, Fabio Milana (eds.), *L'operaismo degli anni Sessanta. Da 'Quaderni rossi' a 'classe operaia'* (Roma: DeriveApprodi, 2008).

ou *Barbarie*.<sup>13</sup> More specifically, The Johnson-Forest Tendency had drawn on the history and contemporary observations of the American working class, both white and black, to argue that workers displayed a capacity for self-organization, self-management, and instinctive adversity to the workings of capitalism even outside and beyond the labour movement, and, indeed, outside and beyond knowledge of Marxism as it had been propagated by the Communist party.<sup>14</sup> This idea implicitly echoed the famous (perhaps apocryphal) words of Big Bill Haywood (of the IWW) when he said, 'I have never read Marx' Capital, but I have the marks of capital all over me' and drew on native streams of working class radicalism to make a universal case for workers' autonomy.

In turn, the workerists' analysis of the 1960s had focused on the emergence of what they called the 'mass worker' as the central subject of Italian capitalism, who, in terms of 'class composition', was young, unskilled, often an immigrant southerner and working on the assembly line. This was a political subject who had emerged in the US during the time of the New Deal—a period which was read by the workerists as an instance of capitalism responding with a 'plan' to counteract workers' insurgency.<sup>15</sup> The 'mass worker', typically a male, was working in the regime of the Fordist factory and paid a family wage which guaranteed his reproduction, and he occupied a strategic position in the Fordist production process, which meant that he was made the linchpin of the whole revolutionary strategy of the operaisti. In fact, the latter sought to wrest the mass worker from a capitalist plan that presented itself in the benign manifestation of 1) national unions engaged in bargaining for incremental benefits at the expense of workers' control at the point of production, and 2) the reformist left parties, including the PCI, which emphasised electoral participation and parliamentary action instead of grassroots activity.<sup>16</sup>

### **Wobblies: Italian style**

It is with these premises that the operaisti turned their attention to the IWW in 1973, a year that signalled the coming transformation of that Fordist-Keynesian model on which they had based their analyses and interventions in the labour struggle. The centre of the debate on the IWW was the

---

<sup>13</sup> Nicola Pizzolato, 'Transnational Radicals: Labour Dissent and Political Activism in Detroit and Turin (1950-1970)', *International Review of Social History*, Vol. 56, n. 1, pp. 1-30; see also Harry Cleaver, *Reading Capital Politically* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979), pp. 59-76.

<sup>14</sup> For an overview see Martin Glaberman (ed.), *Marxism for Our Times: CLR James on Revolutionary Organization* (Jackson: Miss: Mississippi University Press, 1999), pp. xi-xxvi.

<sup>15</sup> A. Negri, 'John M. Keynes e la teoria capitalistica dello stato nel '29' in *Operai e stato: lotte operaie e riforma dello stato capitalistico tra rivoluzione d'Ottobre e New Deal*, A. Negri, S. Bologna, G. P. Rawick, M. Gobbini, L. Ferrari Bravo, F. Gambino (eds.) (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1972).

<sup>16</sup> Antonio Negri, *Books for Burning. Between Civil War and Democracy in 1970s Italy* (London: Verso, 2005), pp. xxxiii-xxxiv.

journal *Primo Maggio*, which was edited by Sergio Bologna and published pieces by Bruno Cartosio, Peppino Ortoleva, Lapo Berti, Serena Tait, Christian Marazzi, Marco Revelli, Ferdinando Fasce and others. However, essays on the IWW also appeared in other journals linked to the revolutionary left (such as *A/Traverso* and *Rosso*), as well in books authored by Italian scholars or in translation.<sup>17</sup> Of particular influence in inspiring the Italians were the translation of Patrick Renshaw's study and Allsop's book on hobos.<sup>18</sup> That was the first time that the IWW had taken a prominent place in the political debates among the left since the early 1900s when Italian emigrants in the US constituted a sizable component of that union and part of the international circulation of ideas about socialism and trade unionism led back to the Italian peninsula.<sup>19</sup> It is easy to understand why the Wobblies were so fascinating for Italian radicals when they were re-discovered in the 1970s. Here was a grassroots organization that sought to deflect the labour movement from its protection of the existing prerogatives of a dwindling number of craft workers (the 'aristocracy of labour') and to mobilise the mass of unskilled, immigrant workers (just the type that were prominent during the *autunno caldo*) with direct action, imaginative tactics and radical demands. The IWW's choice of direct action, such as the total halt of production, mass demonstrations, and sabotage, had also characterised Italian workers' unrest in the period since the *autunno caldo* and it resonated with Italians.<sup>20</sup> Even more interestingly, the IWW's refusal to compromise with the position of the Socialists, which led to Haywood and his followers leaving (or being expelled from) the ranks of the Socialist Party of America in 1913, and their wariness of institutionalised trade-unionism (for instance, the dues check-off system) seemed to offer a model of labour organisation that was

---

<sup>17</sup> See the introduction of Ferdinando Fasce to Musto, *Gli IWW e il movimento operaio Americano in Altrionovecento*, n. 15 (2010) URL [http://www.fondazionemicheletti.it/altrionovecento/Default.aspx?id\\_articolo=15](http://www.fondazionemicheletti.it/altrionovecento/Default.aspx?id_articolo=15); Gisella Bock, 'L'altro movimento operaio negli Stati Uniti: l'operaio massa e gli Industrial Workers of the World, 1905-1922', in Gisella Bock, Paolo Carpignano, Bruno Ramirez, *La formazione dell'operaio massa negli USA 1898/1922* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1976); William D. Haywood, *La storia di Big Bill* (Milano: Iskra, 1977); Peppino Ortoleva, 'Industrial Workers of the World' in Piero Bairati (eds.), *Storia del Nord America* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1978); Vincent Saint John, *L'IWW. La sua storia, struttura e metodi* (Milano: Calusca Editrice, 1971); Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *La ribelle* (Milano: La Salamandra, 1973); Gibbs Morgan Smith, *Joe Hill* (Milano: La Salamandra 1973); Renato Musto, *Gli IWW e il movimento operaio americano* (Napoli, Thélème 1975); Mary Mother Jones, *L'autobiografia di Mamma Jones* (Torino: Einaudi, 1977); Giuseppe Chiappetta, *IWW. Storia e considerazioni critiche* (Milano: Filarosso 1978).

<sup>18</sup> Patrick Renshaw, *Il sindacalismo rivoluzionario negli Stati Uniti* (Bari: Laterza 1970); Kenneth Allsop, *Ribelli vagabondi nell'America dell'ultima frontiera* (Bari: Laterza, 1969)

<sup>19</sup> Bruno Cartosio, 'Gli emigrati italiani e l'Industrial Workers of the World' in *Gli Italiani fuori d'Italia. Gli emigrati italiani nei movimenti operai dei paesi d'adozione (1880-1940)*, B. Bezza, ed., (Milano: Franco Angeli, 1983), pp. 359-396; A. Dadà, *Aspetti del sindacalismo rivoluzionario statunitense: l'Industrial Workers of the World, Ricerche Storiche*, a. XI, 1981, 1, p. 131-166; Donna Gabaccia, 'Worker Internationalism and Italian Labor History, 1870-1914', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 45 (1994), pp. 63-79. See also Levy, Carl, 'Currents of Italian Syndicalism before 1926', *International Review of Social History* 45.02 (2000): 209-250 for a specific case of an Italian wobbly returning to Italy.

<sup>20</sup> Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven. Class Composition and Struggle in the Italian Autonomist Movement* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), pp. 191-196.



antagonistic to the 'reformism' of the incipient Fordist political order.<sup>21</sup> One article which appeared in the journal *Primo Maggio* quoted the pamphlet 'Political Parties and the IWW' by Wobbly leader Vincent St. John on the relationship between political and economic action. For Vincent St. John, '...with the working class divided on the industrial field, unity anywhere else—if it could be brought about—would be without results. The workers would be without power to enforce any demands. The proposition, then, is to lay stress in our agitation upon the essential point: that is, upon the places of production, where the working class must unite in sufficient numbers before it will have the power to make itself felt anywhere else'.<sup>22</sup> This position bore striking resemblance with the one expressed by Mario Tronti in one of the founding texts of operaismo, 'La Fabbrica e la Società', in which he had written about the misconception in the Communist Party of thinking that 'the party can lead the revolution from outside the factory gates'.<sup>23</sup> That the politics on the point of production was central to revolutionary politics was a basic assumption for Bruno Cartosio (who would go on to become a leading American historian in Italy) when he noticed that the IWW was mainly focused on '...the class struggle which was, every day, the reality. It was in their intervention on the different aspects of the struggle that the creativity of the IWW's organizers and militants was at its best'.<sup>24</sup> Equally appealing was what was reported as the IWW's lack of interest in being recognised by employers or in enforcing contracts bargained with management; rather, they sought to expand their support base among workers and to leave the right to strike unbridled.<sup>25</sup>

The reasons why the IWW was so appealing for the Italians were perhaps best summed up by Sergio Bologna in one of the first books to revisit American labour history from a workerist perspective. Bologna asked, 'What was there in the IWW that is so extraordinarily modern?' and he questioned why it was relevant for the Italian context. Firstly, it was an organisation that (according to Bologna in his selective interpretation) addressed the immigrant proletariat and therefore spoke to the working class with its 'intrinsic characteristics'. Secondly, it addressed a mobile workforce, not one that is necessarily employed, building up coordination between different struggles and leveraging on the spirit of the insubordination of the proletariat. And third, it relied on an equally mobile organiser

---

<sup>21</sup> Bruno Cartosio, 'Note e documenti sugli Industrial Workers of the World', in *Primo Maggio*, n. 1, Giugno-Settembre (1973), pp. 43-44.

<sup>22</sup> Cartosio, 'Note e documenti', p. 49; Vincent St John, 'Political Parties and the IWW', ca. 1924. Dated as 1910 in the Cartosio article. Full text in the URL <http://www.iww.org/history/library/SaintJohn/parties>, last visited on 2/5/2015.

<sup>23</sup> Mario Tronti, 'La fabbrica e la società' in *Quaderni Rossi*, n.2 (1962), p. 30.

<sup>24</sup> Cartosio, 'Note e documenti', p. 52 'Dal momento che la lotta di classe era, ogni giorno, la realtà. E sul modo di intervenire nelle diverse realtà di lotta la creatività degli organizzatori e militanti IWW diede la maggiore prova di sé'.

<sup>25</sup> Serena Tait 'Alle origini del movimento comunista negli Stati Uniti: Louis Fraina teorico della azione di massa', *Primo Maggio*, n.1 (1973), p. 21.

‘...who moves from one end to the other of the enormous American continent and who rides the seismic wave of the struggle’.<sup>26</sup>

Thus what initially made the Italians so enthusiastic was the fact that there were striking similarities with the features of the workers’ upheaval of the *autunno caldo*. They praised the IWW for representing ‘the attempt to organize workers’ autonomy’ in the United States—not a phrase that the Wobblies would have used to describe themselves.<sup>27</sup>

The rediscovery of the IWW and the radical American Labour Movement came about rather late and it was itself an effect of the workers’ upheaval of 1969, which had rendered obsolete the idea that ‘pure and simple unionism’ was applicable to the Italian context. In the early 1970s, the bibliography on the American labour movement consisted of only a few publications which had appeared in the 1950s (and even in 1976 Cartosio lamented that ‘the American working class is, first of all, little known’).<sup>28</sup> In the mid-1950s, CISL and UIL, two moderate trade unions that were then linked respectively to the Christian Democrats and the reformist socialists, had tried to put forward what was perceived as an American style of unionism focused on economic betterment while trying to forestall a ‘politicization’ of the working class struggle. To this period belongs the translation of Foster R. Dulle’s *Labor in America: a History* and a number of other publications (among which one was sponsored by the American Department of Labor) that depicted the American labour movement as being pragmatically free of class politics.<sup>29</sup> By the *autunno caldo*, this literature had fallen into oblivion together with the ideas that it promoted.

Operaismo had therefore injected into Italian culture a renewed interest in the history of American labour. This was in part the outcome of a transnational exchange of ideas between Italian *operaisti* and members of the radical American left in the 1960s and early 1970s. In 1967, Ferruccio Gambino, a young activist close to the workerist journal *Classe Operaia* and later a member of Potere Operaio, had joined in Detroit the members of the latest incarnation of the Johnson-Forest Tendency, Facing Reality. Gambino and Martin Glaberman, the leader of the group, established a long-standing friendship that led to the publication of Glaberman’s essays on the American working class in Detroit in an Italian translation and then to the visit of George Rawick to Padua, where Gambino was a

---

<sup>26</sup> Sergio Bologna, ‘Composizione di classe e teoria del partito alle origini del movimento consigliere’, in *Operai e Stato*, Antonio Negri, Sergio Bologna, et al (Milano, Feltrinelli, 1972), pp 13-24.

<sup>27</sup> Peppino Ortoleva, ‘Composizione di classe e crisi dello stato’ in *Primo Maggio*, n. 3-4, Feb-Sept (1974), p. 56.

<sup>28</sup> Preface to Martin Glaberman, *Classe Operaia, Imperialismo e Rivoluzione negli USA* (Torino: Musolini, 1974).

<sup>29</sup> F. Rhea Dulles, *Storia del movimento operaio americano* (Milano: Edizioni di Comunità, 1953); C. S. Gordon, V. D. Parker, *Fattori di pace sindacale negli Stati Uniti: studi e rapporti su industrie americane* (Roma: opere nuove, 1960); United States Department of Labor, *Quarant’anni di conquiste del movimento operaio americano (1913-1953)* (Roma: opere nuove, 1954); J. Brumm, T. Reedy, *Il movimento sindacale negli Stati Uniti* (Roma: Opere Nuove, 1952). For a brief historiographical discussion see ‘Classe operaia e potere politico in USA’ in *Primo Maggio*, n. 3-4, Feb-Sept (1974).

junior faculty member in the Department of Sociology, to give lectures to Italian students.<sup>30</sup> A translation of Rawick's studies appeared in the widely circulated *Operai e stato: lotte operaie e riforma dello stato capitalistico tra rivoluzione d'Ottobre e New Deal*, (the proceeding of a conference in 1967 which served to consolidate the operaisti's interest in American labour movements) and then there was an Italian translation of *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community*, which fired up Italian radicals' imaginations by promoting the autonomous agency and creativity of the black community.<sup>31</sup> A workerist reading of the American Working Class would characterize the journal *Zerowork* in the mid-1970s, a journal that was staffed by both American and Italian scholars.

Glaberman was also in regular correspondence with Bruno Cartosio, who spent two years in North America. Therefore, the rediscovery of the IWW as a 'workerist' organization had taken place within a network of political activism that bridged two continents and had been fostered by reciprocal interest in the contemporaneous waves of worker mobilizations at the end of the 1960s.<sup>32</sup>

### **The disappearing mass-worker**

As the 1970s progressed, the Italian reading of the IWW evolved in response to the challenges to workers' autonomy posed by the restructuring of large industries and the fiscal crisis of the state. I will use once again the case of FIAT to give a more specific example. The oil crisis of 1973 hit the Italian automobile industry particularly hard and in two years (1973-1975) FIAT production decreased by one third.<sup>33</sup> That slump in sales combined with the stormy industrial relations at FIAT to create a sense of acute internal crisis. In October of 1974, FIAT's new General Director, Cesare Romiti, announced that the company had run out of cash to pay workers' wages and laid off 73,000 workers with state-assisted redundancy funds (*cassa integrazione*).<sup>34</sup> With average inflation standing at over 17 per cent, organised labour focused its demands on getting an automatic yearly salary increase that was to be equal for all employees (*punto unico di contingenza*).<sup>35</sup> The crisis highlighted the importance of maintaining buying power. Between 1974 and 1975, Turin became home to an

---

<sup>30</sup> Glaberman, *Classe Operaia*, cit. For these connections see also Grace Lee Boggs, *Living for a Change: An Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 140.

<sup>31</sup> *Operai e stato*, cit. G. Rawick, *Lo schiavo americano dal tramonto all'alba* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1972). See Cartosio's preface for the theme of the autonomy of the slave. Through the same connection, it published the book of another member of the group, James Boggs, whose *La Rivoluzione Americana*, a study of black activism in the 1960s, had been published by Jaca Books (Milan) in 1968.

<sup>32</sup> Nicola Pizzolato, *Challenging Global Capitalism: Labor Migration, Radical Struggle, and Urban Change in Detroit and Turin* (New York: Palgrave, 2013). Interview with Bruno Cartosio, *Futuro Anteriore*, p. 7-8.

<sup>33</sup> Archivio Storico Fiat, Fiat: le fasi della crescita (Torino: Paravia, 1996), pp. 129-138.

<sup>34</sup> Giampaolo Pansa, Cesare Romiti, *Questi anni alla Fiat* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1988), p. 10.

<sup>35</sup> 'Inflazione Italian 1975', Inflation.eu, Worldwide Inflation Data, URL: <http://it.inflation.eu/tassi-di-inflazione/italia/inflazione-storica/cpi-inflazione-italia-1975.aspx> last visited 16/05/2015.

widespread movement of the 'self-reduction' of social housing rent, utility bills and bus tickets, which had spiralled following inflation; that struggle was initiated by radicals in the late 1960s but escalated in those years and was eventually supported by unions as well.<sup>36</sup> Operaisti argued that inflation was part of capital's plan to roll back the wage gains that workers had secured in previous years.<sup>37</sup> Self-reduction was organised so that a reduced amount would be paid to bus companies and energy providers; the latter initially refused to go along with it but reversed their decision once the movement gained momentum. The protest started in Pinerolo, an immigrant working-class area in the outskirts of Turin, not far from FIAT Rivalta, a newer plant that had been constructed in 1967 to assist production at Mirafiori, and it spread to other working class neighbourhoods and eventually to other parts of the industrial north as well as Rome.<sup>38</sup>

In this context, Italian radicals used the history of the IWW as a means of political intervention. The IWW offered the Italians an inspiring comparison with a militant labour organisation in times marked by shifts in the composition of the working class and of the transformation of the organisation of production. For Peppino Ortoleva, the trajectory of the Wobblies (again in a rather restrictive reading), which had accompanied the emergence of Taylorism as a system of production, had been an innovative response to a new twist in capitalism. The goal of achieving an encompassing industrial unionism had been a timely solution for the changes that prefigured the dislocation of craft workers from the core to the fringes of industrial production. Eventually, the narrative went, as Taylorism found its ultimate development in Fordist-Taylorism, the IWW imploded under state suppression and as the result of strategic blunders.<sup>39</sup> Similarly in 1970s Italy, the sometimes overly romanticised story of the IWW raised the question of how to build up a form of militant unionism that would be responsive to the restructuring of the Fordist regime heralded by 1969-style industrial conflict and the oil recession. By raising this question, the operaisti reiterated that analyses of the current 'class composition' were to drive the political strategy of working class organisations. They

---

<sup>36</sup> Alemanni, Ferigo, Gheddo, Lattes, Rispoli Paola, Sburlati, *Autoriduzione: cronache e riflessioni di una lotta operaia e popolare: settembre-dicembre 1974* Serafino (Sapere, 1974).

<sup>37</sup> Christian Marazzi, 'Moneta e capital finanziario' in *Genealogie del futuro. Sette lezioni per sovvertire il presente*, Gigi Roggero, Adelino Zanin (eds.) (Verona: Ombre Corte, 2013), p. 72.

<sup>38</sup> Bruno Ramirez, 'The Working Class Struggle against the Crisis: Self-Reduction of Prices in Italy', *Zerowork*, n. 1 (1975). Luciano Villani, 'Neanche le otto lire. Lotte territoriali a Roma (1972-1975)' *Zapruder*, 32 (2013), pp. 22-39. 'Gli aumenti del metano, l'autoriduzione e le nostre proposte', Centro Piero Gobetti, Fondo Marcello Vitale, Subfondo Valentina Donvito, folder UA2, Lotte per la casa, Torino, 1969-75; Eddi Cherki and Michel Wieviorka, 'Autoreduction movements in Turin, 1974' in 'Autonomia. Post Political Politics' *Semiotext(e)*, n. 3 (1980), pp. 72-80.

<sup>39</sup> For this comparison, see the introduction by Peppino Ortoleva for Mike Davis, 'Il cronometro e lo zoccolo', *Primo Maggio* n.7 (1976), p. 29.

conceptualised 'class composition' as the nexus between the technical characteristics of the working class in the production process, political subjectivity, and array of 'antagonistic behaviours' that the same working class adopted to oppose that technical division of labour.<sup>40</sup> An understanding of this evolving class composition was thus crucial to any prospect of successful labour militancy, as it provided the basis for comprehending distinct segments of the workforce and their combative relationship with the production process. As production was moved from massive plants such as Mirafiori and decentralised at small factories and, later, at plants with more sophisticated automation and robotization, the composition of the Italian working class also changed.<sup>41</sup> After 1973, 'antagonistic behaviour' was gradually marked by a tendency to eschew mass confrontation within the compound of the factory and embrace absenteeism, or simply withdraw from the labour market.<sup>42</sup>

In the same way as the IWW had understood in a timely way the decline of the centrality of craft workers in the production process, Italian Marxists were concerned about how to respond to the likely decline of the mass workers who had driven the social protest and industrial conflict of the previous years. If no solution was found to this conundrum, it was likely that economic restructuring would bring about the renewed political submission of the working class (a prescient insight about what would happen after 1980). Lapo Berti expressed this pressing concern when he wrote, '...the way in which social conflict, that is, antagonism, is developed is not anymore solely driven by the [mass] "factory" and its productive process; actually it now often emerges from other spheres of social life. Insisting with a "workerist" vision of capitalism might result in an overlooking of the specific way in which antagonist conflict emerges in a mature capitalist society [and therefore] losing the ability to identify the forms and contents of political action'.<sup>43</sup> Having based political action on what they called the 'centralità della fabbrica', operaisti were now struggling to find a strategic framework that could be adopted in a world where the Fordist factory was likely to fade from view.

## The Italian Left in Crisis

---

<sup>40</sup> Lapo Berti, 'Astrattizzazione del lavoro', *La tribù delle talpe*, Sergio Bologna, eds. (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1977), pp. 125.139, p. 127.

<sup>41</sup> Vincenzo Comito, *La Fiat: tra crisi e ristrutturazione* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1982). Giuseppe Berta, *Conflitto industriale e sistema d'impresa alla Fiat, 1919-1979* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1979).

<sup>42</sup> The statistics for absenteeism were marked by a steady increase in Italy (and elsewhere) throughout the early 1970s, going up from 155 million hours in 1968 to 219 million hours in 1971. At FIAT, absenteeism almost tripled between 1968 and 1973. See 'Assenteismo e cicli di lotte in Italia', *Primo Maggio*, n. 6 (1975-76).

<sup>43</sup> Lapo Berti, 'Astrattizzazione del lavoro', p. 128.

From radicals' point of view, in the latter half of the 1970s the Italian left was in a state of crisis. Following its electoral success in 1976, the PCI (always a target of radical propaganda) had finally cut a deal with the Christian Democrats and entered the government, although with nominal opposition. This choice was referred to as a 'historic compromise' because of the momentous consequences it had for Italian politics. By 1976, both *Potere Operaio* and *Lotta Continua* had ceased to function as organisations. In 1977, a new wave of social protest which was focused in particular on universities had emerged outside, and sometimes in opposition to, the circles of operaismo.<sup>44</sup> And all throughout the second half of the 1970s, episodes of left-wing terrorism had increased both in frequency and scope. In Turin, the groups *Brigate Rosse* and *Prima Linea* further fanned the flames of this violence with the murder of Carlo Casalegno, the vice-director of the FIAT-owned newspaper *La Stampa*, and FIAT's head of planning Carlo Ghiglieno, climaxing with the abduction and murder of former prime minister Aldo Moro in Rome in 1978.

In their publications, these radicals were self-critical. One particular set of criticism and self-criticism is important in the context of this study: the idea that *Lotta Continua* (and others, such as *Avanguardia Operaia*) had changed from being groups responsive to the self-activity of workers and their class needs into organisations driven by a vanguard of leaders who then tried to 'sell' a political line to the rank and file.<sup>45</sup> One militant asked, 'How are we to fight the legacy of this [Leninist] tradition which has affected us deeply and paralysed us?'.<sup>46</sup> One possible way out seemed to be the IWW.

The gap between the leadership and workers was exemplified by the defeat of *Lotta Continua*'s demand for a 35-hour workweek at FIAT Mirafiori. In 1975, *Lotta Continua* had intervened in national metalworking contract negotiations by trying to override the union's modest proposal of reductions of working hours. The proposal had gained some interest among FIAT workers but was rejected by the national assembly of metalworkers. It also created internal tensions—a fistfight among workers erupted on the occasion of a demonstration in support of the union's contract

---

<sup>44</sup> One workerist describes the 1977 upheaval in this way: 'The 1977 movement was something completely different. It was a new and interesting movement because, firstly, it did not really have roots in previous movements, or maybe it did, but in a highly complex manner. It clearly had another social basis, different from both 1968 and 1973. It had a social composition based on youth who had broken with or rejected the political elites, including the elites of 1968, including therefore the groups of *Lotta Continua*, or even of *Autonomia Organizzata*. So, it broke not only with the traditional communist movement, but also with 1968. It broke exactly with the vision of communism, while, at the end of the day, also the workerists thought of themselves as being the "true communists". The '77 Movement absolutely did not want to be "truly communist"'. In 'For an analysis of *Autonomia*: Interview with Sergio Bologna' by Patrick Cuninghame, p. 96.

<sup>45</sup> Luca Meldolesi, 'Per lo sviluppo della tribù: un commento', in *La Tribù delle talpe*, pp. 140-148; see also Franco Berardi, *La nefasta utopia di Potere Operaio* (Roma: Castelvechi, 1998).

<sup>46</sup> Meldolesi, 'Per lo sviluppo della tribù', p. 147.

platform in Turin.<sup>47</sup> Eventually, the proposal did not win the support of a majority of metalworkers, not even at FIAT, where Lotta Continua had its strongest following. That defeat prompted critiques of the group leadership, exemplified by the comment of one worker who complained, 'Our organisation emerged from workers' autonomy, but we the workers have now lost importance in its decisions. [...] We need to claim back our role without our positions being determined from above, as in the case of the 35 hour [workweek]'.<sup>48</sup> As noble as it was, it seemed to be an idea parachuted to workers, not arising from the rank and file.

This type of direction from above found an echo in the seven 'theses' that emerged from the National Congress of Lotta Continua in 1975. For instance, thesis n. 4, 'On the question of the party', adopted the principle of 'democratic centralism' already used by the PCI and proclaimed that there was a need for 'tactical leadership of the proletarian struggle'. The task of a revolutionary party, it was argued, was not only to be an 'expression' of the masses, but also the 'tool that would lead them'.<sup>49</sup> In fact, throughout the documentation of the Congress one encounters juxtaposed Leninist positions but no recognition of the apparent contradictions with the original ideas about the spontaneity and self-activity of the working class. Lotta Continua was trying hard to accommodate an 'oligarchic' political line within the principles of spontaneity and self-activity that had originally inspired it. For former militant and historian Giovanni De Luna, as long as the upheaval was widespread in the factories, activists shaped their political line in a continuous dialogue with the workers on the shop floor, and this contrasted markedly with the form of top-down political mobilization adopted by PCI. However, after 1973 shop floor militancy declined and activists took a more ideological route, embracing the format of a political party, and 'the centrality of workers became more of a dogma and ceased to be an analytical tool'.<sup>50</sup>

Similar arguments were common in other fringe aspects of what was loosely called Autonomia. Steve Wright, who has studied the Comitati Autonomi Operai (CAO) in Rome, found that Leninist precepts informed revolutionary groups' outlooks, though with the argument that the party was

---

<sup>47</sup> Raffaello Renzacci, 'Lottare alla Fiat', in *Cento... e uno anni di Fiat*, a cura di Antonio Moscato (Bolsena, Massari editore, 2000), p. 54.

<sup>48</sup> 'Atti del convegno operaio di Lotta Continua', in *Bollettino interno*, n. 2, (1976 ca); Luigi Bobbio, *Lotta Continua, storia di un'organizzazione rivoluzionaria*, (Roma: Savelli, 1979), pp. 156-158. For a long time, the internal division of the LC caused by the '35 hours' issue continued to be debated. See 'Intervento del compagno Mario di Novara', in *Lotta Continua*, 28 August 1976, p. 2.

<sup>49</sup> Tesi n. 4, 'Le tesi, le relazioni politiche, lo statuto', Primo Congresso Nazionale di Lotta Continua, Roma, gennaio 1975, Centro Documentazione M. Grassi, Roma. See also Aldo Cazzullo, *I ragazzi che volevano fare la rivoluzione. 1968-1978 Storia critica di Lotta continua* (Milano: Sperling & Kupfler, 1998), pp. 248-252.

<sup>50</sup> Giovanni De Luna, *Le ragioni di un decennio: 1969-1979. Militanza, violenza, sconfitta, memoria* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2011), p. 120 and Bobbio, *Lotta Continua*, p. 130.

only a means, not an end. 'The party must develop working class autonomy and not substitute itself for it', wrote the CAO, but nonetheless with 'the view that the "full expression" of working class consciousness could only be brought "from without"'.<sup>51</sup>

While the 'Leninist turn' of many protagonists of the 'autonomia' is now part of the mainstream interpretation of the Italian radical left of the seventies, the debates about political strategy were always fluid in that decade. For instance, in one of the final documents produced during its existence Potere Operaio had reiterated their support for 'organised autonomy and workers' leadership' (*autonomia organizzata e direzione operaia*), that is, the necessity of workers' hegemony in terms of political action on the basis of a *fusione completa* of external activists within the working class.<sup>52</sup> Another workerist collective, Gruppo Gramsci, had similarly affirmed that the organisation of workers' autonomy (an apparent oxymoron) would have to occur *inside* the movement, not as 'an external political idea of a group that "leads" the movement'.<sup>53</sup>

In the context of this ongoing debate, the IWW also represented a model of a non-Leninist rank-and-file organisation, a prime example of how to be attuned to the needs and demands of the working class. This implicit reading was made explicit by Renato Musto in one of the most widely distributed collections of IWW documents published in Italian. The IWW were to be contrasted with what in Italy he saw as the self-appointed vanguard groups of the working class which, 'after having rose to prominence during a first period of spontaneous struggles [...] found themselves searching in [Marxist] theory [to find] the right and duty to lead'. For Musto, they eventually identified them in Lenin, not in the unlikely orthodox Communism that they criticized.<sup>54</sup> As a result of this conceptualization, the Wobblies became synonymous with a dedicated rank-and-file struggle, direct action, and critiques of the bureaucratization of organised labour. In the mid-1970s, a network of factory and neighbourhood committees in northern Italy took the name 'Collegamenti Wobbly', eventually publishing the newsletter *Wobbly: Foglio di Lotta del Precariato Sociale*.<sup>55</sup>

Thus, on the surface, the Italians saw in the IWW a refusal to buy into the institutionalised system of organised labour and admired their aim to become a social force that was antagonistic to the existing social and economic order—and those were reminiscent of key features of the autunno

---

<sup>51</sup> Steve Wright, 'A Party of Autonomy?' in Timothy S. Murphy and Abdul-Karim Mustapha (eds.) *The Philosophy of Antonio Negri: Resistance in Practice* (London: Pluto Press, 2005).

<sup>52</sup> 'Atti del seminario di Padova', in Comitati autonomi operai di Roma, *Autonomia operaia*, eds, Savelli, Roma, 1976 pp. 50-51.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* Lo scioglimento del Gramsci, p. 54.

<sup>54</sup> Renato Musto, *Storia degli IWW. Documenti* (Napoli: Theleme, 1975), pp. xviii and xix.

<sup>55</sup> Both the network and the newsletter went into decline and eventually ceased operations in the 1980s. A short account of this group is available on the website <http://www.umanitanova.org/tag/collegamenti-wobbly/> [last visited on 11-3-2016].



caldo movement. 'Militant historians' also drew parallels between the way the IWW had grappled with the riddle of spontaneity and organization, issues that were quite familiar to the Italian left of the 1970s.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, with its rebuffing of electoral politics, the IWW validated the rejection of the much-debated idea of working *within* the PCI to transform it into a revolutionary party. Upon close reading, however, the IWW also provided ammunition for those within the broad workerist fold who criticised the trajectory of revolutionary groups, in particular Lotta Continua. For these militants, after the 'seven thesis' Lotta Continua had morphed into something close to a political party, while the example of the IWW cautioned against granting primacy to political action over economic action.

Bruno Cartosio stated, retrospectively, that '...it was important for us to show that between a company-friendly unionism and the hegemony of the Communist party there existed another option which did not feature the structure of a Leninist party [...] but operated in different ways, with a different flexibility [...] and a decentralised structure, like a network'.<sup>57</sup>

## Conclusions

In this article I have used the case of the IWW and workerist historiography in Italy not to establish a systematic comparison between two workers' movements (in 1910s US and 1970s Italy), but rather to illustrate a case of 'translation' across time, as well as space, of militant practices, languages, and goals. Studying the legacy of the IWW in Turin involves investigating the influence of American labour history and the political use of a historiography in a way that transcends national boundaries. The diachronic interconnectedness between revolutionary politics in the US and Italy was well suited for the workerist conception of the working class and of capitalism, which was global in scope—a perspective which after all was emphasised by the global crisis of the 1970s.

The political use of the IWW to interpret Italian labour and social struggle made it possible for political militants to sustain a political project of a working class that was autonomous from the Leninist tradition in a political context of decreasing industrial conflict, the electoral dominance of the PCI on the left, and the Leninist I of some of the groups whose history was rooted in *operaismo*.

---

<sup>56</sup> Ferdinando Fasce, 'Gli Industrial Workers of the World: La classe operaia Americana tra spontaneità e organizzazione', in *Le Lotte sociali negli Stati Uniti alla fine del Diciannovesimo secolo* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1974), reprinted in *Wobbly! L'Industrial Workers of the World e il suo tempo*, Bruno Cartosio, ed. (Milano: Shake Edizioni, 2007), pp. 17-70.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with Bruno Cartosio in Guido Borio, Francesca Pozzi, Gigi Roggero, *Futuro Anteriore: Dai 'Quaderni Rossi' ai movimenti globali: ricchezze e limiti dell'operaismo italiano* (Roma: DeriveApprodi, 2002), attached CD-ROM, p. 5.

‘What, after all, still fascinates us about the myth of the IWW? – wondered Sergio Bologna – It’s the implicit critique to both reformism and bolshevism; it’s that moment in which the worker in a multinational corporation in the most advanced site of imperialism displays post-communist behaviour before communism became the expression of the workers movement’. Punning on a classic piece by Mario Tronti titled ‘Lenin in England’ (where he argued for a novel form of organisation of workers’ struggles), Bologna suggested that it was perhaps time for a new slogan: ‘the IWW in Turin’.<sup>58</sup> For Renato Musto, the agenda of the IWW ‘even if utopian, contained an important suggestion: any movement that focuses only on the importance of the political sphere and leadership without a tight link with the needs of those grassroots forces really able to undermine the existing order [...] ends up reinforcing the existing structures of oppression’.<sup>59</sup>

Militants’ interest in the history of the IWW ended abruptly in 1980. As in the United States, the 1980s signalled the decline of a model of industrial relations in which organised labour could act as a senior partner. More broadly, it led to a backlash against the left that hushed radical critiques of managerial authority at plants. When in October of 1980 workers again occupied FIAT Mirafiori in protest against a substantial plan for layoffs and restructuring affecting 23,000 employees, they did so in a completely different context than six years earlier. The company had successfully presented to public opinion an image of an ungovernable system which needed to be transformed in order to revamp productivity.<sup>60</sup> FIAT drew on taxpayers’ money to manage the layoffs and, over the course of the 35-day protest, dealt a decisive blow to the opposition of the trade union leadership. Unions eventually bowed to the altered balanced of power and were unable to challenge the implementation of the company’s plan, buying into the argument that FIAT’s need to restructure was an inevitable response to the lower productivity of workers and the crisis of the automotive sector. The long strike, which exhausted and divided the workers, ended after a much-publicised counter-march by plant supervisors and conservative citizens who argued for a return to normalcy on behalf of the ‘silent majority’.<sup>61</sup> The final agreement was more unfavourable in terms of laying off workers than the one initially put forward 35 days earlier and it ushered in a period of time in which Italians took stock of the decline of blue collar culture associated with the ‘economic miracle’ of the 1950s.

---

<sup>58</sup> Sergio Bologna, ‘Amo il rosso e il nero, odio il rosa e il viola’ in *Tribù delle Talpe*, p. 156; Mario Tronti, ‘Lenin in Inghilterra’, *Classe Operaia*, 11 February 1964.

<sup>59</sup> Musto, *Storia degli IWW*, p. xl.

<sup>60</sup> Nicola Tranfaglia, Brunello Mantelli, ‘Apogeo e collasso della “città-fabbrica”: Torino dall’autunno caldo alla sconfitta operaia del 1980’ in Nicola Tranfaglia (ed.), *Storia di Torino* (Torino: Einaudi, 1999), pp. 829-862.

<sup>61</sup> Marco Revelli, *Lavorare in Fiat* (Milano: Garzanti, 1989); Luigi Arisio, *Vita da capi. L'altra faccia di una grande fabbrica* (Milano: ETAS libri, 1990).

The difficulties that the trade unions experienced in restructuring were compounded by the fact that between 1975 and 1980 a segment of radical activists had brought to the extreme their endorsement of a vanguard revolutionary philosophy by embracing clandestine armed struggle on behalf of, but dissociated from, the majority of workers that they claimed to represent.<sup>62</sup> The dozens of attacks, including kidnappings and murders, carried out against FIAT executives and management created the impression that there was a connection between any endorsement of radical activity on the shop floor and actual terrorist actions, leading unions to be ambivalent in their support of militant tactics.<sup>63</sup>

Often presented as a foregone conclusion due to the decline of productivity, the political effects of terrorism, and the international shift away from Fordism, the *sconfitta operaia* (workers' defeat) of 1980 was also due to the contingent choices made within the left that had once led shop floor politics. With the absence of critical, militant, and organised groups on the left, the Mirafiori workers who opposed FIAT's restructuring plan found themselves silenced and divided; trade unions were left as the only bargaining partner for FIAT management but their ability to bargain had been undermined, rather than enhanced, by the declining influence of radical politics.<sup>64</sup> Eventually trade unions made choices that reflected national political considerations (the 1980 final agreement was signed in Rome at a tripartite bargaining table) rather than concern for shifting power relations on the point of production. In the following decade, FIAT workers, reduced in number and drastically different in terms of their class composition, abandoned both radical politics and trade union membership, while the company's success during those '35 days' led the way for a national backlash against organised labour in the private sector and its marginalization in national politics.<sup>65</sup> In this different political environment, some of those 'militant historians' who in the 1970s had been drawn to the IWW in a search for a 'usable past' entered academia as professional researchers, creating a core group of Italian Americanists who used the channels of academic publishing to promote their vision of American labour history as a 'distant mirror' of the woes of the Italian

---

<sup>62</sup> Simone Neri Serneri (eds.), *Verso la lotta armata. La politica della violenza nella sinistra radical degli anni Settanta* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2014).

<sup>63</sup> Tranfaglia, Mantelli, 'Apogeo e collasso della "città-fabbrica"', pp. 838-849. Though deeply rooted in historical memory, in retrospect this connection is questionable. Of the 61 workers dismissed by FIAT for political violence in 1969, only one was eventually identified as belonging to a terrorist group. See *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> For the decline of trade unions' clout in the 1980s, see Giuseppe Berta, 'L'arena delle relazioni industriali negli anni Ottanta: le occasioni mancate' in Simona Colarizi (ed.), *Gli anni Ottanta come storia* (Catanzaro: Rubettino, 2004), pp. 345-346.

<sup>65</sup> Gabriele Polo, Claudio Sabattini, *Restaurazione italiana. FIAT, la sconfitta operaia dell'autunno 1980. Alle origini della controrivoluzione liberista* (Roma: Manifesto libri, 2000); P. Galli, G. Pertegato, *Fiat 1980: Sindrome della Sconfitta* (Roma, 1994); Cesare Annibaldi, *Impresa, Partecipazione, Conflitto. Considerazioni dall'esperienza Fiat. Dialogo con Giuseppe Berta* (Venezia: Marsilio, 1944).

working class now filtered by professional specialization.<sup>66</sup> In this role, they witnessed the decline of labour history as a discipline no longer in sync with the backlash against radical politics that struck both the United States and Italy in the 1980s.

---

<sup>66</sup> Introduction to *Beyond the Nation: Pushing the Boundaries of US History from a Transatlantic Perspective*, F. Fasce, M. Vaudagna, and R. Baritono, eds., (Torino: Otto, 2003), p. 11.